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Humor as an inroad to qualitative minority representation: The case of *Taboe*, a humorous human interest-program

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Abstract: One of the challenges Public Service Media institutions face today is how to translate normative values such as universality and diversity into measurable and tangible content in an attempt to realize their “public value”. This contribution shows how the communicative functions of humor can help create public value by introducing audiences to minorities. As a case in point, we analyzed *Taboe*, a humorous human-interest program about minorities including, amongst others, the visually impaired and the obese, broadcast by Flemish public broadcaster VRT in 2018. Based on in-depth interviews with program makers and participants and a qualitative content analysis of the program, the study found that humor provided the program with a positive, funny yet emotional tone of voice that attracted and kept the audience’s attention. By giving various minorities an active voice, *Taboe* introduced mainstream audiences to the their perspective, encouraging increased knowledge and understanding and, in turn, tolerance of, and acceptance towards, the minority groups represented.

Keywords: public service media, humor, human interest, minorities, qualitative research

1 Introduction

Public Service Media (hereafter: PSM) institutions differ from their commercial counterparts on the basis of a number of qualities that originate from normative values such as universality and diversity, and which are translated into gov-

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ernment contracts or mission statements. A main challenge for PSM in today's scattered media market is to simultaneously manage quantitative targets, mainly with regards to audience reach, while providing public value, for instance, by including and addressing minorities in their content. This contribution aims to show the relevance of humorous programming in addressing those challenges. From a market failure perspective, some argue that (humorous) entertainment content is no longer a relevant part of PSM goals. However, we maintain that this remains a key area where PSM can create public value.

This contribution centers on understanding the potential of creating public value by combining humor with human interest. To this end, a theoretical framework is developed that explores PSM's public value remit and how it relates to presenting minorities on-screen while reaching wide and diverse audiences. This will allow us to understand the potential of humor in this context. Next, we discuss the case of *Taboe*, a humorous human-interest program about minorities that was broadcast on één, the general-interest television channel of Flemish PSM institution VRT in 2018. Based on a content analysis and in-depth interviews with program makers and participants, we analyze the specific ways in which *Taboe* combined humor and human interest to get its complicated message across. This leads to a broader discussion of the role that humor can play in promoting knowledge and understanding towards minorities.

Normative PSM concepts and public value

Since its inception, both the normative idea and the reality of PSM have been organized around a number of key principles, including universality and diversity (Donders and Van den Bulck, 2016; Garnham, 1990; Jakubowicz, 2003; Scannell and Cardiff, 1991; Van den Bulck and Moe, 2017). Aside from the technology-oriented definition regarding availability, the concept of universality has a social dimension that refers to PSM having a diverse reach, that is, it should reach an audience that is both spread widely and varied across ethnic backgrounds, sexes, age differences, levels of education, amongst others, including minority groups (Garnham, 1990; Scannell and Cardiff, 1991, p. 14; Van den Bulck and Moe, 2017). With regards to programming, universality means providing content that shows the diversity of cultural and ethnic groups in society (Donders and Van den Bulck, 2016, p. 4).

While universality and diversity have been PSM goals since the beginning, their abstractness makes it difficult to translate them into specific programming. Furthermore, following shifts towards a more competitive media landscape, PSM's growing need to legitimize their position has pushed them to translate

normative concepts such as “providing a service” and “public value” into measurable performance indicators but has found them struggling to do so.

In its simplest form, public value means that which adds value to the public. In PSM practice, it lets us consider value creation beyond economic value and include social, cultural, and political value (Benington and Moore, 2010, p. 44). Social and cultural value refers to what adds to social capital, cohesion, social relationships, meaning and cultural identity, and both individual and communal wellbeing (Benington and Moore, 2010, p. 45). This way, the concept of public value helps PSM institutions to operationalize normative, long-lasting values such as universality in ways that the public can appreciate and governments can evaluate (Lowe and Martin, 2014, p. 29–30). This paper focuses on one of these: expanding knowledge and understanding of minorities with which audience members may not come into contact in their everyday lives. This principle of “dispersed disconfirmation”, bringing individuals into contact with minority groups, can help change attitudes towards, and ideas about, these groups, encourage acceptance, increase tolerance and discourage stereotypical thinking (Johnston and Hewstone, 1992). However, several authors point to a severe lack of representation of minorities, also in PSM content (Klein and Shiffman 2009, p. 56), which Gerbner calls “symbolic annihilation” (Gerbner and Gross, 1976). To counter this, PSM should aim for a well-rounded and complete representation of minority groups.

PSM programming: Generalist and special interest

To fulfil their remit, PSM are expected to provide programming that meets two main aims. On the one hand, public broadcasters should offer generalist content aimed at a wide audience. This type of programming should reflect a broad audience’s interests and the common culture shared among citizens (Born and Prosser, 2001, p. 676; Donders and Van den Bulck, 2016; Jakubowicz, 2003, p. 153). On the other hand, their schedule should include content that goes beyond the mainstream, including less accessible and more complex topics such as issues dealing with various minority groups. Traditionally, these topics tend to be situated in more “difficult” program genres such as hard news and current affairs. We argue that public value is also created by bringing these topics into the mainstream and delivering it to wider audiences.

Considering popular content with a mass appeal as an appropriate vehicle for the representation of minorities has relevance both from a market-failure perspective – PSM offering content that is not popular/mainstream enough for commercial broadcasters – and from a cultural-educational logic: PSM providing a large audience with alternative perspectives to help them gain a more diverse

understanding of society. From this perspective, popular programs have been and remain an important part of PSM institutions' generalist programming schedules. This leads us to our first and second research question:

How does *Taboe* provide a diverse representation of minorities and the issues they are confronted with?

What is the perceived public value of *Taboe* and its potential impact?

Humor: Types and functions

We combine two perspectives to take a closer look at humor's possibilities to create public value. First, we look at humor within interpersonal communication, where research has shown the benefits of humor in psychological well-being. While our research focusses on the use of humor in television programs, this psychological framework offers valuable insights concerning the motivations for using humor and responses to those uses. We discuss two typologies, one based on the types of humor, the other based on the functions that humor can fulfil. In the next section, we discuss how audiences respond to humor in entertainment with prosocial potential.

The use of humor in social interaction has been studied quite extensively for its benefits (Martin and Lefcourt, 1983). Humor can help to deal with stress (Martin and Lefcourt, 1983), can reduce tension (Lynch, 2002), and can stimulate closeness among people experiencing humor together (Fraley and Aron, 2004). Research distinguishes four humor styles, two adaptive and two mal-adaptive (Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray, and Weir, 2003), comparable to the divide between positive and negative humor. Adaptive humor styles are affiliative and self-enhancing humor, both of which help to regulate tension, stress, and make people feel more comfortable. These styles of humor use funny things and tell jokes (Kuipers and McHale, 2009). Just like positive humor, the jokes are good-natured, integrative, and non-hostile (Samson and Gross, 2012). Alternately, mal-adaptive humor styles are aggressive and self-defeating, including sarcasm, ridicule, and teasing at the expense of others or oneself (Kuipers and McHale, 2009). Similarly, negative humor is more mean-spirited or disparaging (Samson and Gross, 2012). While this typology already refers to the outcomes of humorous communication, it still remains close to the actual content of the jokes or message.

Meyer (2000) offers another classification, based on the functions and goals behind humorous communication. He steps away from interpersonal communication and looks at the way public speakers and leaders use humor to unite and

divide audiences. In the identification function, for example, the sender attempts to put himself on the same level as the audience, trying to relieve tension. The clarification function uses anecdotes and memorable phrases to teach socially expected behaviors but only addresses mild violations of norms and seeks to unify the audience in mutual enjoyment. Enforcement – a dividing function – singles out behaviors that do not fit expected social patterns and ridicules them. The resulting laughter directed at the transgressor is meant to change his future behavior to a more socially accepted manner. Finally, the function of differentiation is used to divide groups, social views, opinions, and people. It uses violence and aggressions towards an out-group, whose beliefs and convictions are held up to be ridiculed. As such, it is meant to establish a line between the in-group and the others (Meyer, 2000).

Meyer (2000) recognizes that these functions are often dual and even paradoxical. While negative, dividing humor points out and emphasizes gaps between in- and outgroups by punishing undesirable social behavior, it simultaneously promotes in-group cohesion. Sharing jokes can lead to feelings of in-groupness, belonging together, and closeness (Bormann, 1982; Fraley and Aron, 2004). According to Meyer (2000), which function a message actually fulfils depends on the rhetorical goal intended when the message was created. This brings us to the third research question:

Which types and functions of humor are used in *Taboe*?

Humor and its audience

Existing literature (Bartsch and Oliver, 2011; Bucaria and Barra, 2016; Chattoo and Feldman, 2017; Corner, Richardson, and Parry, 2013; Graefer and Das, 2017; Kuipers, 2011; Nabi, Moyer-Gusé, and Byrne, 2007) has discussed the processing of entertaining content and, more specifically, humor, and has found insights that help explain its prosocial potential. These insights concern both the characteristics of humor itself and its potential for PSM in reaching wider audiences with diverse content.

Comparable to the concept of “dispersed disconfirmation”, as Gray (2008, p. 54) discusses, entertainment programming can help viewers gain insight into unfamiliar cultures by enabling them to watch and interact with television as a form of “play”. Audiences rehearse interactions they would not be confronted with in their everyday lives, for instance, coming into contact with minorities. McGuigan (2005) and Klein (2013) specifically point to humorous programs as a way to provide viewers with alternative representations of social issues and to

highlight perspectives that may have been neglected by news or current-affairs programs. Another way humor can contribute to PSM objectives is by aiding the creation of a common culture by affirming and re-examining shared cultural beliefs (Douglas as cited in Mintz, 1985, p. 73). In their opinion, humor can disrupt existing patterns of perception but also create a celebration of agreement due to shared laughter.

The use of humor does, however, require consideration. Buijzen and Valkenburgh (2004, p. 164) indicate that certain types of humor work for certain types of audiences or messages. Several factors determine which topics one can joke about, and context is the most important. This refers to all participants – the sender, the audience – and the setting. For one, there are individual preferences – what someone does or does not like, or simply what mood they are in. Bucaria and Barra (2016) emphasize the relativity of what is considered appropriate and mention that the directionality of humor is a key factor in determining what is acceptable humorous behavior. Similarly, Kuipers' (2011) talks about “humour regimes”, the unwritten rules of who can joke about which topics. In a study by Graefer and Das (2017, p. 5), involving dark humor, participants stress the importance of who the sender and recipients of humor are. When a member of a majority group addresses the minority, humor is considered offensive. A member of the minority group itself, joking about the topic at hand, however, is less problematic. Especially when it comes to humor about difficult situations, joke appreciation depends on who is the target (Sultanoff, 1995). Overall, self-deprecating humor and humor directed at the situation are more appreciated than humor targeted towards a specific group or a person. Additionally, humor about crisis situations requires a certain distance, either in time, emotion, or proximity, to be considered helpful rather than hurtful (Sultanoff, 1995).

Aside from the type of humor and directionality, the context within which humor is created is key to preventing a message being discounted (Nabi et al., 2007) or trivialization of serious topics (Moyer-Gusé, Chung, and Jain, 2011). To increase message acceptance, Campo et al. (2013) state that humor on sensitive topics requires attention to sensitive details, and placing humor within the context of the overall message is key. Nabi et al. (2007) call this the “restoration of gravity”, meant to remind viewers of the realness and seriousness of the topic at hand. One approach to reduce message discounting is to introduce a likable and credible source, such as a familiar and trusted celebrity (Nabi et al., 2007) whose real-life identity is known to the audience (Graefer and Das, 2017, p. 5).

As we can imagine, reality is often more complex, which we believe to be demonstrated by our chosen case study, *Taboe*. This raises our fourth research question:

In what ways did the inclusion of humor in a human-interest program influence the potential to discuss minorities?

2 Methodology

VRT and *Taboe*

To better understand how the prosocial potential of humor can be translated to the television screen, this paper conducts a case study of *Taboe*, a human-interest and comedy program broadcast on VRT’s general interest and primary TV channel *één* between January 21 and March 18, 2018. Each episode discussed a particular topic considered “taboo” and introduced with the tagline “This is something people should not be laughing at, but we are going to do it anyway”. Each episode started by introducing the audience to four or five members of the general public, functioning as representatives of a taboo-topic.

Table 1: Overview of all episodes of *Taboe*, including first air date and topic per episode.

Episode 1: 21/01/2018	Physical disabilities
Episode 2: 28/01/2018	Incurable disease
Episode 3: 04/02/2018	Different skin colors
Episode 4: 11/02/2018	Visually impaired
Episode 5: 18/02/2018	Poverty
Episode 6: 25/02/2018	Mental vulnerabilities
Episode 7: 04/03/2018	Sexual orientation
Episode 8: 11/03/2018	Obesity
Episode 9: 18/03/2018	Compilation episode

The host was Flemish Philippe Geubels, who has had a successful career as stand-up comedian and panel member in humorous TV shows. Geubels and the participants spent one week in a shared house near the Belgian coast, a setting familiar to most Flemish citizens. Each episode alternated human interest with fragments from a stand-up comedy performance on the taboo subject, performed in front of the week’s participants and a wider audience, including but not limited to, others who identify with the taboo topic. We selected the program for our case study due to its prime-time spot in the schedule, high viewing figures, its critical

and public acclaim, well-known host, and combination of sensitive topics and humor. At the time of writing, the format had been purchased by nine countries (Zaman, 2018).

The research was conducted with a mixed-methods design applied to the case study of *Taboe*, combining interviews and content analysis of the program. The aim is to form a thick description with insights into policy and production issues regarding *Taboe* (Vanhaeght and Donders, 2015, p. 140) and its representation and discussion of minorities using humor.

Interviews

We conducted expert interviews with two groups of respondents: (1) those involved in the production and broadcasting of *Taboe*, and (2) participants of the program. Ethical clearance was obtained from University of Antwerp’s Ethics Committee for the Social Sciences and Humanities. Participants were selected via a convenience sample. Producer René, who was our first contact at Panenka (the production company that created *Taboe*), introduced us to key stakeholders in the production process and participants. We contacted those most relevant to our research. All the contacted parties accepted our invitation except for one, who worked as an editor and helped in selecting and interviewing the candidates. Since we were able to conduct an interview with her supervisor, we decided not to replace this respondent. This resulted in a small interview sample, based on the size of the crew itself, and the consideration that we were not aiming for a representative sample of participants or producers. We acknowledge that this led to certain limitations when drawing conclusions beyond individual experiences.

Table 2: Overview of interviewees.

Respondent	Role	Interview date	Interview location
Steve	Channel manager één for VRT, responsible for purchasing of <i>Taboe</i>	24/07/2018	VRT
Tom	(Co-)creator and comedy writer	06/08/2018	Panenka offices
Thibaut	Participant episode 01	21/08/2018	Home Thibaut
René	Producer	28/08/2018	Panenka offices
Tineke	Editor, selecting candidates	03/09/2018	Panenka offices
Mireille	Participant episode 02	05/09/2018	Home Mireille

In our research, an expert is considered someone who has been selected due to recognition of their knowledge otherwise not accessible to researchers (Littig, 2009, p. 100). The two types of expert interviews each required their own approach. First, we interviewed those involved in production and broadcasting of the program. We noted the risk of gathering rehearsed responses, formed through media training. We anticipated this by also “studying down” (Mayer, 2008, p. 144), interviewing those involved in the day-to-day production of *Taboe*, who may be less prone to rehearsed responses. Due to the exploratory nature of our research, we conducted open-ended interviews (Aberbach and Rockman, 2002). This offered respondents a framework to organize their responses, while also inviting them to freely express their views. We believed this would maximize respondents’ input. The interviews were analyzed to gain insight into the production process of *Taboe*, the selection of topics and candidates, and their opinions about the use of humor, their understanding of its potential, and how they considered this during production.

Secondly, we interviewed participants who were experts in their own right. Considering this is exploratory research, we did not seek full representation of all participants of the program. These respondents are experts from experience as part of a minority group. We practiced caution regarding the sensitive and personal matters by offering additional time and consideration during both the planning and conducting of the interviews where needed (Ritchie, Lewis, McNaughton Nichols, and Ormston, 2003, p. 205), without foregoing the purpose.

The interview guide first addressed factual information, moved to experiences during the production/airing period and ended with opinions on the use of humor in communication about sensitive topics. Interviews were transcribed and coded using NVivo software. This led to an extensive list of descriptive codes that we later fit into a thematic framework based on the literature explored (Ritchie et al., 2003, p. 300). This framework was made in both excel and x-mind, a free mind-mapping software. This resulted in the code book that formed the basis for our analysis.

Content analysis

A small-scale content analysis was done for each episode (except for the compilation episode). The objective of the content analysis was to better understand how certain production decisions were translated to the screen. An analytical tool was developed based on the literature study.

The tool consisted of four parts. The first section registered general information per episode, as a way to identify episodes for potential future research.

Second, we discussed the actors, meaning every participant in the program. We looked at their backgrounds, other forms of diversity, and whether the episodes addressed stereotypes. We considered “holistic representation”, that is, whether their personality was shown in a well-rounded way that went beyond being part of a minority group. Third, we examined the content of the episode. We explored whether the audience was provided with information about the minority and how this was approached, that is, individual experiences, the use of emotions, and by indicating explicit mentions of society’s responses and (lack of) tolerance. Finally, the tool explored the use of humor in the program. We examined the topics, tone, styles, and source of humor throughout human interest and stand-up comedy scenes and studied how they related to each other. We paid attention to elements addressed in literature, such as humor regimes, functions, and potential “restorations of gravity”.

3 Results and discussion

Diversity and representation of minority groups

We discussed above how PSM provide a service to their audience by offering insights on topics they may not come into contact with in their daily lives, and how this can be linked to the concepts of “symbolic annihilation” and “dispersed disconfirmation” or “play”. To indicate if and how *Taboe* helped diverse on-screen representation of minorities, we address representation both in quantitative and qualitative terms. The first considers simple on-screen visibility of minority groups, the latter looks for non-stereotypical portrayals as a counterbalance to more cliché representations.

The *Taboe* format takes minority groups as starting point, ensuring visibility for the “group of the week”. Interviews with production stakeholders revealed they understood the need for diversity within participants’ demographics, for example, by balancing age and gender of participants. Special attention was given to within-topic diversity, for instance, in episode 2, which included participants born blind and those who became visually impaired through injury or illness. Other factors affecting selection included willingness to share personal stories, be vulnerable on camera, fit with the group per episode, having a sense of humor, and the capacity to put comedy in perspective. The production team stressed that participant selection in television is about gut feeling, also when it came to *Taboe*, and about finding participants that stimulate the audience to relate on a personal level. They explained how they believe that including emo-

tional background stories can encourage the audience to connect and build a “para-social” relation with participants. In particular, they stressed the potential of moments when the program emphasized similarities between minority and majority groups rather than differences. Such a connection is fundamental in decreasing feelings of prejudice towards minorities (Schiappa, Greg, and Hewes, 2005).

In our content analyses, we explored quantitatively and qualitatively how production considerations were translated on-screen. In episode 3 (different skin colors), all participants identified as male. When we addressed this during interviews, the team mentioned they considered adding female participants but believed this would have changed the tone of the conversation in the episode. While we could not determine whether this would have been the case, it was interesting to examine, considering the tone of voice of the program. The production team prioritized the positivity in the program. In that way, *Taboe* differentiated itself from more traditional, sober human-interest programs, even before adding stand-up comedy. This choice to approach minorities with a more positive and lighter tone of voice was appreciated by both participants and the person responsible for purchasing the program at VRT.

Television programs often struggle to give each participant sufficient air time. Content analysis indicated each episode was on average 55 minutes to one hour long, which was split between humor and human interest and about four to five emotional stories. So, while the program attempted to show its participants as well-rounded people, there was not always enough time to portray each participant as “more” than their minority group. Instead, our content analysis showed that participants of *Taboe* addressed the importance of on-screen representation, mostly during episode 3 (skin color) and 7 (sexual orientation). They recalled a lack of positive role models in the media and feeling like “outsiders” or “not normal”. They also addressed stereotypical representation and how they linked it to negative, disrespectful treatment by the general public. This indicates attention to the importance of well-rounded representation, even if realization was sometimes limited by the format. Geubels also addressed how society and media tend to reduce people to their minority group. These stereotypes were used in the stand-up comedy routine. The clichés were used as a starting point but the comedy built beyond them, even going as far as to ridicule those who frame people only within their stereotypes (see below).

Public value and impact

“It is everything the public broadcaster is, which is, offering people insights, more understanding, connecting people, surprising them.” – Steve, Channel manager één

The above-quoted view of the channel manager regarding how *Taboe* fits the PSM profile was confirmed by members of Panenka, emphasizing the “natural” fit of the program with the values of PSM. We will now discuss this match, focusing on the value added by combining humor and human interest. The key factors which our research identified were the program’s wide reach, the service provided by exploring alternative perspectives, including information, and stimulating debate.

Taboe profited from favorable scheduling (prime time, Sunday evening on VRT’s primary channel), and interviews revealed a wide reach across age groups. The channel manager discussed how PSM channels often struggle to attract an audience that is not initially interested in a topic, even when socially relevant. He believes entertainment can function as a catalyst, because more people are willing to give it a chance. In our interviews, one participant compared the program to a teacher who makes jokes and manages to keep students’ attention.

While it could be considered successful enough for a program to reach a wide audience, PSM additionally strive to provide a service of value to that audience. The first way *Taboe* offered the audience an alternative perspective from the views expressed in other programs is by approaching minorities in a positive, humorous manner. Our content analysis indicated a need to consistently restore the program to a positive tone of voice. This was created by comments or jokes from Geubels or participants and by editing, which allowed emotional moments to be followed with lighter scenes or comedy. Our interviews with participants pointed out that their topics can be a heavy load to carry, but that is exactly why they feel humor has value, breaking this negativity. A second alternative perspective we found is that the program let the minority group join in the laughter, including them in the process of creating the comedy rather than to treat them as an outsider. Because of this inclusion, the program was allowed to laugh at a minority, thus going against the existing humor regimes. This makes sense within Bucaria and Barra’s (2016) discussion of the appropriateness of jokes. Because Geubels is considered “part of the group”, the directionality changes. Even though his status as a member of the majority has not changed, in this context he is accepted as an ally of the minority, and now gets to target jokes inward and make fun of the situation. This resulted from conversations and attention to sensitivities created in the human-interest scenes of the program and, subsequently, was used in the more humorous scenes. We will address this combination in the following section.

Additionally, *Taboe* provided a service to its audience by informing them on topics outside of their everyday lives. Our content analysis indicated several instances where participants in the program mention they had grown to accept their own reality, but that their greatest discomfort came from how society treats their minority group. They discuss topics such as social exclusion, bullying and its emotional consequences, or how lack of acceptance has affected their ability to openly discuss their situations. Interviews with participants of the program indicate that they appreciate the program's insights and especially the light-hearted tone it applies, lowering the threshold to understanding. Our content analysis identified reoccurring entry points for information in the program. First, by the selection of b-roll¹; for instance, during episode 2 (visual impairment), Geubels led participants to their rooms, explained the set-up of the building, and the b-roll showed how participants made their way through the house. Second, information came in the form of personal stories which participants shared with Geubels in their private interviews. These provided a more emotional insight for the audience, when participants explain how they dealt, and came to terms, with their issue. Aside from personal perspectives, certain topics were also explained in a technical, factual way. One participant discussed the course of treatment the cancer required, and another used suicide figures to support his call for better mental healthcare in Belgium. Finally, Geubels became an audience surrogate by asking the participants questions that the general audience may want to ask in "real life" situations but would have been too sensitive to do so. He often pointed out his own lack of knowledge or stated he was prejudiced before hearing the participants' stories. It is possible that this reassured the audience regarding their own lack of knowledge, as long as they were willing to increase their understanding, following Geubels' example. We consider him to be the type of likable and respected source, discussed by Nabi et al. (2007) as a tool to increase message acceptance. One important note is that it is likely that the participants and the audience knew who Geubels was before they met him. This could be intimidating, since Geubels has been known for his more hostile style of comedy in the past. We find in our content analysis that Geubels uses self-defeating humor and, in some episodes, the participants target him with jokes of their own. Even though self-defeating humor typically gets labelled as a mal-adaptive style of humor, we believe that its function here is to let the participants identify with Geubels and make him more approachable.

¹ "B-roll can be any visual material that 'shows' something related to the topic of the program you are constructing. It is often used by the editor of the video to 'cut away' from the main interviews [...]" (Bowen and Thompson, 2013, p. 240).

Mixing the types and functions of humor

We found different applications of the styles and functions of humor discussed in our literature review throughout *Taboe*. As mentioned, *Taboe* is a mix of human interest and humor. We will discuss this combination in the next section, but it is crucial to understand that this merging occurred throughout the entire program. Rather than alternating each other, both can be found all over. An emotional scene can end with a joke, and a funny scene can include moments of poignancy. In this context, a mix of humor styles and functions emerges.

Our content analysis showed that *Taboe* combines negative and positive humor styles but uses the paradoxical function discussed by Meyer (2000) to maintain a positive message. Which humor style is used seems to be determined by who is targeted by the joke. When addressing the minority itself or the general audience, for example, by pointing out common misunderstandings, the program usually makes lighter jokes and recovers to the normal situation quickly, avoiding harm, as pointed out in Meyer's (2000) clarification function. For example, in episode 1, Geubels makes Manon, a young girl struggling with an injury that paralyzed her left arm, drop a ball during a game. While they share the silly joke, Geubels picks up the ball and hands it back. This type of slapstick type joke could be hurtful, considering it highlights her disability. However, because of the quick restoration and shared laughter, it does not resonate as a negative form of humor. Rather than creating a divide between Geubels and Manon, it is a bonding moment.

Alternatively, the program uses humor that is usually categorized as negative or mal-adaptive when targeting people who are unwilling to accept the minority or display other forms of antisocial behavior. The program points out this antisocial behavior and wants it to be ridiculed. These harsher jokes can be seen as an enforcement of acceptable social behavior, that is, tolerance towards minorities. This way, a dividing function occurs between those who are accepting of minorities and those who are not. However, if we consider the context of PSM, it becomes clear that the actual function is more determined by the prosocial stance than the humor-style used, confirming what Meyer (2000) pointed out regarding the rhetorical goals and functions of humor in communication. This makes us conclude that *Taboe* uses a combination of adaptive and mal-adaptive humor styles to fulfil a positive communicative function by being crude only to those displaying undesirable social behavior, and by uniting the audience with the represented minority group. According to Meyer's (2000) insights regarding these functions, it could be that this communication leads viewers to feel discouraged to continue displaying antisocial behavior.

Merging humor and human interest

In this section we will discuss how the program used context to adjust humor regimes in a positive manner and how this had a synergistic effect on the public value of the program.

In several instances, *Taboe* showed understanding of the existing humor regimes (Kuipers, 2011), understanding that members of majority audiences do not easily get permission to laugh at minority groups and have to be aware of the sensitivities surrounding these topics. For example, one of the tricks used to bypass these humor regimes was to create a fictitious character that fits the taboo topic, or by joking about the whole minority group rather than singling out one person, placing comedy into the “vacuum of the collective”. This corroborates Sultanoff’s (1995) idea that distance may be crucial in humor about troublesome situations. These collective or fictitious targets often underwent more negative, mal-adaptive forms of humor.

The program’s most substantial consideration of sensitivities is embodied in its format: merging the emotion and fact of human interest with comedy. The combination of music, tone of voice, and room for emotional conversation is an example of how humor on sensitive topics can be placed within a context to avoid trivialization or message discounting. The human-interest scenes in *Taboe* were shot in director Kat Steppe’s respectful and patient style. Geubels, known as a comedian, surprised the audience by showing a soft-spoken version of himself. We link this to Campo’s consideration of sensitivities (Campo et al., 2013), because the program remains aware of the difficulty of the topics it is handling. Our content analysis showed that some candidates discussed what they thought of as humorous and what not. If and when they identified certain issues as off-limits, this was considered during the stand-up comedy routine. Different from basic comedy, the audience was shown the routine’s actual ending. Geubels thanked his audience and often jokingly apologized or stated how nervous he had been before. We mark this as a recognition of the atypical situation in which a majority member jokes about a minority. Stripping the comedy of that background could render it offensive. Not including comedy would reduce *Taboe* to a classic human-interest program. The choice to edit human interest and stand-up comedy interlaced with each other provides air to human interest and a gravity to comedy.

Our interviews with the production team showed a good understanding of humor’s dual function (Meyer, 2000). The program made use of this potential in a couple of ways. One comedy writer pointed out the concept of a “common enemy” as a target for jokes. We will explore this specific application in more detail because it bridges the paradox of unifying the audience with the minority,

while simultaneously excluding the unaccepting members. This target is a person or group that is universally disliked by majority and minority groups, which creates what Mintz (1985) called “shared laughter”. This points the audience towards underlying commonalities between them and the minority group, rather than differences. Our content analysis identified three variations where humor addressed a shared target. The first instance was when Geubels became the target of the jokes made by both himself and participants. We would not label him as an “enemy”, given the lack of aversion towards him. He is well-known by diverse audiences and formed a common target for shared laughter nonetheless. The second variation was the creation of a new outgroup, where a sort of “unknowing outsider” became the target. This fits better with the idea of a “common enemy” because we identified these personas in the hidden camera scenes, where participants “trick” regular people into misunderstandings, creating a sense of discomfort by employing majority groups’ lack of understanding as a source of comedy. The audience, who gets to watch these scenes from the comfort of their living room, now gets to look in on these awkward interactions with a sense of privilege, caused by their newly gained understanding of the minority groups and their issues. The third and final variation was created during Geubels’ stand-up comedy, when he joked about people who were ill-informed, who had mistreated or ridiculed the minority group or were in any way related to creating the taboo surrounding their topic.

The combination of context, a shared target for jokes and the shared laughter it creates led to the feeling that a new ingroup was created. This new ingroup overlaps the minority group and the audience at home, and the new outgroup are those unknowing and unwilling to understand. The outgroup becomes the butt of the joke. By pointing out which behavior the minority group finds hurtful or uncomfortable, the program identifies which behavior is considered antisocial by the newly created ingroup, as such encouraging the prosocial alternative. This would confirm that Meyer’s (2000) idea regarding the paradoxical function of humor in communication, to promote in-group cohesion while simultaneously increasing distance from the out-group, can also be applied in mass media communications such as the consumption of television programs. However, whether this actually occurred can only be confirmed by follow-up audience research.

4 Discussion and conclusion

Following previous studies, this paper demonstrated the potential of humor to address minorities. We considered this potential within PSM’s need to opera-

tionalize normative values such as universality and diversity in programs. Our research focused on a case study of *Taboe*, a program whose format combined humor with human interest. This provided a unique perspective for both the program and the study alike. We explored the combination of these two styles and looked at the public value *Taboe* created. To do so, we explored the representation of diversity in the program, the combination of humor styles and human interest, and the public value of the program for PSM institution VRT.

Our case study reached four conclusions. First, we addressed the importance of a production team that was aware of the need for on-screen diverse representation and indicated that other considerations in selecting candidates and storylines were sometimes prioritized. These choices were made to uphold an overall positive perspective in the program, an interesting choice when dealing with these topics. Second, the study addressed the public value of the program for its public service media institution VRT and considered how this fit into the normative values and assignments of PSM institutions. Here we identified *Taboe*'s special ability to attract and keep attention, which is essential in addressing the universality principle (Scannell and Cardiff, 1991). The program did this while providing new insights and perspectives outside of the audience's everyday lives, showing the diversity of groups in society (Donders and Van den Bulck, 2016). Due to the information provided in the program and its broad popularity, we can hypothesize that the conversation outside of the program, both online and in person, carried on after broadcast. Third, we found that *Taboe* combined adaptive and mal-adaptive humor styles (Meyer, 2000) but with a clear positive communicative function (Samson and Gross, 2012), namely to point out socially undesirable behavior (Meyer, 2000). Finally, we found that human interest could create context for humor used in the program, while humor removed some of the seriousness, potentially increasing a willingness to watch. Moving forward, we would call this combination "humor interest", and particularly stress its potential to create ingroups that overlap minority and majority groups.

We acknowledge the limitations of this study, most notably due to the choice of a specific case study. All results in this study can only be accepted regarding *Taboe* and its specific point in time and within the Flanders' television market. Additionally, this study did not include any audience research, and therefore can only hypothesize regarding the formation of new ingroups or audience discussions and their afterthoughts.

Maybe the most important conclusion from this study should be considered within the larger discussion of what content PSM should provide. As mentioned, VRT's current management contract pays little attention to entertainment programs, only clearing the path for entertainment when public value is created. *Taboe* appears to be an example of how public broadcasters and their production

companies can move beyond a classic idea of “either-or” and use hybrid formats with meaningful content, considering the public value that was created by this program and its unique approach.

Due to international interest for the format, it could be possible to repeat this analysis in other countries, considering their specific regional and cultural differences and sensitivities. Furthermore, follow-up audience research will be conducted by the research team in 2019, one year after the first broadcast of the program. Additionally, a second season of the Flemish version of *Taboe* has been announced, addressing a new range of topics worth exploring.

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